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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000548

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MOJ OFFICIAL BEMOANS RISE OF EXTREMISM IN MOROCCAN SOCIETY

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Ministry of Justice (MOJ) Director of Penal Affairs and Pardons and Director of the Prosecution Service M'hammed Abdenebaoui (protect) expressed concern over growing societal intolerance and religious rigidity in Morocco. A pious Muslim, he complained that extremism, exported by Saudi Arabia, was negatively affecting even his own family and said that veils and beards were being substituted for real piety and morality. He strongly cautioned the U.S. against linking its counter-extremism messaging efforts with Morocco's, saying that it would be counterproductive, although he encouraged the USG to pursue its own independent programs. Abdenebaoui is due in Washington in July on an IVLP trip. He hopes to discuss terrorism prosecutions and U.S. parole and conditional release systems with Department of Justice and other counterparts. End Summary.

I Blame the Saudis

12. (C) During a meeting on May 21, ostensibly to discuss his upcoming International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) trip to the U.S., MOJ Director of Penal Affairs and Pardons and Director of the Prosecution Service M'hammed Abdenebaoui (protect) (number three in the Ministry's hierarchy) launched into a two-hour-long dissertation on his fears over the rise in extremism in Moroccan society. A generally even-tempered, if voluble, man, Abdenebaoui became visibly agitated during a discussion of nine Salafist prisoners who had recently escaped from prison saying, "I blame the Saudis. They are exporting this perversion of Islam to Egypt and from there to Afghanistan and even here."

Please Don't Link your Efforts with Ours

13. (C) In response to a question about what he thought the U.S. could or should do to support Morocco's messaging efforts, Abdenebaoui said emphatically, "Please, do nothing. However well intentioned, your support and involvement in this particular area will only make our work harder." He encouraged the U.S. to continue its own counter extremism efforts, but to avoid any linkages with Morocco's work. Abdenebaoui ascribed the change in societal attitudes to the Moroccan education system's inability to effectively

articulate and impart a sense of civic sensibility and critical thinking. "Younger students do not feel that they belong to anything, and they are not taught to examine ideas; so they fall prey to easy sermons that fill vacuums in their lives." He excoriated the Salafists for misinterpreting the Quran and taking verses out of context for political ends, but said that "We (moderates) have no effective counter message." He said that while the Ministry of Islamic Affairs was doing a better job in some areas, such as curriculum reform, there was no central authority to coordinate Morocco's overall counter-radicalization strategy, messaging and actions.

This is Not Afghanistan

¶4. (C) Abdenebaoui complained further about what he perceived as a misguided but growing societal focus on "haram," or religiously forbidden practices, rather than the spirit of Islam, which he said involved living a just life and treating others well. "We were perfectly good and pious Muslims without beards and jellabas until the Saudis and Muslim Brotherhood discovered satellite broadcasting. Now everyone thinks clothing and facial hair make the Muslim rather than actions. This is not Afghanistan."

¶5. C) Abdenebaoui, who is a forty-year-old devout Muslim with a Western outlook and educational background, recounted tensions within his immediate family regarding modes of dress and prayer which have grown more marked in the past 10 years.

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He described arguments, which he said mirror broader societal tensions, over timing of prayer and acceptance of differing thoughts on Islam. He also went on at length about what he described as a new "obsession" with the hijab (veil).

He said that it had more cultural than religious connotations, but had been co-opted by the rising tide of conservatism and "intolerance" as a sine qua non for Muslim women who wish to express their devoutness.

Comment

¶6. (C) As head of the prosecution service as well as being responsible for all correctional policy, Abdenebaoui is a busy man, but he seemed to feel he had to get something off his chest. After being interrupted by the phone several times, including by the Prime Minister's Office which was trying to get information about a recently disrupted terror cell, Abdenebaoui asked that his calls be held and settled in for a chat. He was truly concerned about a "hardening" of Islam in society. Normally a strong and cheerful booster of the government line, he seemed wan and discouraged. Abdenebaoui is an excellent interlocutor and his IVLP visit will provide an opportunity to strengthen ties between him and the USG as well as discuss ways in which the two countries can collaborate on a large range of issues, from counter-terror prosecution to correctional reform and counter extremism. End Comment.

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